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Flipping Methodology: Or, errancy in the meanwhile and the need to remove doors

Carol A. Taylor¹

Abstract

This article ponders two questions:

1. What does 'post-qualitative' mean to you?
2. Why do you think the 'post-qualitative' movement is important to the field of qualitative inquiry?

In response it poses a method/ology of errancy – a flipping methodology – that locates post-qualitative research as an ethico-onto-epistemological political project of opening theory-practice spaces for differential matterings. Post-qualitative flipping is not an individual undertaking, it is an ecology of practices, a resonation across bodies, a navigating of movement for a politics of change, in which even barely perceptible shifts possibilize new modes of thinking and unthinking, doing and undoing.

Keywords

Post-qualitative; Errancy; Flipping methodology; Hospitality; Visitation

Becoming-vagabond

David asks two questions:

1. What does 'post-qualitative' mean to you?
2. Why do you think the 'post-qualitative' movement is so important to the field of qualitative inquiry?

Questions which glimmer, glower and gurn at me in the dark. Questions which expand, contract, frame, provoke, niggle, challenge in the daylight. Questions which I put off

¹ Carol A. Taylor, Professor of Higher Education and Gender, Department of Education, University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath, Somerset, BA2 7AY. Email: C.A.Taylor@bath.ac.uk

thinking about for a long (enough) time. Questions which make me wonder, muse, ponder, pause. Questions which demand patience. Questions which make me stop and search – what? My files. My pdfs. My many lists of ‘read later’ and ‘useful for something’ articles. My mind-heart-body. Surely I have the answers somewhere. Difficult questions whose orbit expands sneakily and infectiously. What does ‘mean to you’ mean to me? Questions which itch: movement? Is that what it is? Is that what I’m part of? That sounds far too organized, especially when used with that ‘the’ – *the* post-qualitative movement – which irks with its implicit assumption of coherence, unitariness, linearity even, perhaps even genealogy, because ‘movements’ have ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’, right? They imply conformity and norms and subscriptions and even *prescriptions*. They are something whose rules one adheres to. To which one pays one’s dues. And then there’s that uncomfortable question of ‘importance’. *Is* the post-qualitative important? In what way, how, why and to whom? Dear me. I’ve been having such fun. The weight of ‘importance’ brings in its wake questions of significance, impact, value and, a short slide from that, justification, rationale and purpose. But who/what/how defines ‘important’?

Stop.

Hang About.

Slow Down.

Muse A-while in the Meantime.

Rather than lose it down the rabbit hole, let’s unloosen.

Shake it out.

These are questions to feel the way into with string, with hands, with feet, with tongue, with body-heart-mind, with Frankie the dog, with trees, with air, with light, with rain, with tea-coffee-wine-water-gin, with pen-paper-paint, with bits and bobs, with music, with the pigs, sheep, chickens, herbs, flowers and grasses at the nearby city farm, with friends, with colleagues, with co-conspirators, with students, with this-that-and-the-other. In a spacetimemattering of now-and-everywhen-here-there-around-and-about. In a mode of wit(h)ness. In a mood of always more never less. And with a rebel yell. This is what post-qualitative enables – and ‘means’ – for me.

Errant/erratic potentiality

In *The Politics of Affect* Massumi (2015) provides some pointers for working towards an affective political ecology of resistance. He argues the need to get rid of the idea of power as constraint or power over. Instead, power is power *to*, power ‘in-forms’ us, he says, it emerges with us as we actualize it. Is a matter of ‘potentializing’ freedom from the unpredictabilities and inaccuracies that are released when bodies/fields collide in deterministic systems. When this happens, paths ‘cannot be accurately determined ... they can turn erratic and end up in totally different places than you’d expect’ (p.17). Massumi calls such erratic errancies ‘relational flips’. This, for me, is the potential of post-qualitative modes/moods: responding to – and response-ability for – those unforeseen, happenstance and fortuitous collisions, interferences and resonations which widen out through errancy – through erratic patterns of diffraction. Post-qualitative methodological flips shape resistance as doing/thinking/writing/working-with in erratic mode as a means to disrupt the business-as-usual of academic research, pedagogy and practice in neoliberal institutions (Taylor, 2019). Something happens, or some things happen, there is a ‘coming-together of movements’ and, we sense//know/feel it – a relational effect, a complexity effect – as the constraints flip ‘over into conditions of freedom’ (Massumi, 2015, p. 17–19). Flip. Here-and-gone but, in that intensive in-between, new matterings emerge, the glimmer of a new politics becomes possible, new potentialities for knowing materialize. And don’t try to grasp, hold tight or squeeze for the last ounce of meaning. If you do, it will evade you. You’d be much better off squeezing lemons. Post-qualitative work requires you put away your butterfly pins. I can travel with that, jog along with that, for now.

And

So

But

There is a specificity to flipping, to how flips arise for whom, when, where and why. Flips emerge in the affective molecular particularities of specific socio-cultural, historical and educational conditions and practices, and these conditions and practices constitute a politics of location (Haraway, 1998). I think of my post-qual colleagues, their geographical emplacements, and their ethico-onto-epistemological inheritances, allegiances and commitments, and I know that whatever post-qualitative is, the politics of location mean that it is not the ‘same’ for them as it is for me, it is not the ‘same’ on each occasion, nor is it the ‘same’ moment by moment. These differences matter in their differentiating unfoldings

whether you are in Oslo-Helsinki-Chichester-Manchester-Stockholm-Sydney-Turin-Cape Town-Bath-New York-Delaware-Alberta-Auckland-anywhere/anywhen. While it might be the case that the connective filaments forged across these politics of location cohere around always varying and different but productively resonating shared commitments to contesting research as business-as-usual, then those commitments themselves condition what emerges *as* post-qualitative research, as well as what post-qualitative research ‘is’ and ‘does’. Am I more comfortable, then, with post-qualitative as an assemblage of pop-ups, fuddles, squirms, perturbances, instances and events which keep theory-practice on the move, rather than with the claiming of these doings/practice-ings/thinkings as card-carrying adherences to *the* post-qualitative *movement*? Perhaps I am worrying too much. As Koro-Ljungberg (2016) notes, labels are insufficient and inaccurate. Labels do knowledge/power work to discipline bodies, minds and practices AND labels work as sites for generative exchange, affiliation and desire.

Leave it here.

For now.

If post-qualitative is worth anything as meaning and/or movement it has (‘we’ have) to stay attuned to the ongoing activation of its/our continually emergent vagabond variations. In saying this, I half-turn and Guattari (1995, p. 19–20) whispers in my ear about the dissident nature of thought and desire and how ‘molecular rupture(s) [are] capable of overthrowing the framework of dominant redundancies.’ I incline my head and there is Deleuze (2006, p. 11), flowing in the meanwhile, reminding me of the importance of ‘*entre-deux*’ – something produced in-between as a difference being differentiated – never something preformed.’ From around the corner, Koro-Ljungberg’s (2016, p. 4) voice sails toward me on the breeze speaking of ‘temporary breathing pauses, halts, and energy voids that initiate new series of moments and extensions of thought.’ The morning light entering through the curtains encourages my sleep-mazy head to attend to a hint from St. Pierre (2017, p. 696) that post-qualitative inquiry resonates, accumulates, intensifies, so that matter captured on the ‘strata of conventional humanist qualitative methodology’ can be loosened and returned to ‘chaos, to the formless matter of the plane of immanence and infinite possibility.’ And, as I sip my Yorkshire tea, a strong brew which reminds of the dramas and the glories of the High Peaks (needed now I live in the lush softness of Somerset), MacLure (2010, p. 278) hails me: schemata, codes, conventional inquiry, she says, block us from the terrors, the joys and the banalities of the ‘intolerable complexity of the world.’ This is what post-qualitative enables –

and ‘means’ – for me, an engagement with the ongoing specificities and difficulties of the here-and-now to craft our academic endeavours as a worthwhile undertaking ‘to block the reproduction of the bleeding obvious and thereby, hopefully, open new possibilities for thinking and doing’ (MacLure, 2010, p. 277).

Aimance and hospitality

And yet. The (al)lure of the humanist qualitative research comfort-blanket is strong, its safety an invitation to drowse, its security a chance to lay down arms and rest. This is why, as we move with our research doings, I argue the need to welcome in co-conspirators whose provocations open up more possibilities and pleasures of/for post-qualitative work. Co-conspirators bring food to share as we go on post-qual ramblings, excursions and events. Thinking-with post-qualitative research as picnic – as something done through generosity and hospitality in an informal, more airy openness – edges toward a *posthuman* sense of self-dispersal. In post-qual picnic mode of collaborative endeavour, research and writing practices partake of the generativity of collective enunciation: I am not ‘I’ alone. The pseudo-authority of the individual ‘self’ is shunted to one side; a ‘we’ emerges and takes hold, dissolving the ‘I’ in a post-personal affective and often joyful embrace, a sort of transversal *jouissance*. Zembylas (2017, p. 24) suggests that such hospitable joy can be considered a mode of ‘aimance’ which brings together friendship (*philia*) and love (*eros*) as an ethico-political practice in education. Fleeting and deeply-felt moments when a sort of lucky and heady gracefulness alights on post-qualitative doings which include bags-with-Neil-Nikki-Mirka-Angelo-Constance-Carol (Taylor et al., 2019), and dragons-with-time-and-motion diffractions-Sheffield-Sydney (Taylor and Gannon, 2018). Just two of many moments.

Stengers (2018, p. 82) advocates a practice of slow learning – of learning ‘with others, from others, thanks to others what a life worth living demands, and the knowledges that are worth being cultivated’, and situates relationality and response-ability beyond capture by the violences of capital and dominant science as central to this learning. Zembylas (2017, p. 29) suggests that aimance, emerging as it does ‘at the interface of Islamic and Western thought’, and with its orientation to affective solidarity toward otherness, not only endows any emergent ‘we’ forged in aimance with the potential ‘to live better’ (El Khayat and Khatibi, 2010, p. 31) but is also an imaginary which holds space open for decolonial work and to contest hate-speech and Islamophobia.

How does post-qualitative work enable us/encourage us/require us to sit with these concerns – to say with the trouble as Haraway (2016) would say – and to shape research practices in more activist vein so that research has more political efficacy? Flipping, Massumi (2015) makes clear, is not an individual undertaking, it is an ecology of practices, a resonance across bodies, a means of navigating movement that effects a politics of change, such that even barely perceptible shifts make new modes of thinking and unthinking, doing and undoing, possible.

And yet.

I notice that the majority of bodies at post-qualitative presentations, workshops, events, happenings, gatherings and conferences are still largely white, privileged, and in abundant possession of dominant modes of cultural capital. Whose bodies are not here and why? I raised this point in a talk I gave to an all-white gathering and the air sagged and the good mood wavered as discomfort swirled and denial was voiced. But, I think, if post-qualitative endeavours are to be worth anything, and if flipping methodology in post-qualitative mode is an ethico-onto-epistemological political project in relation to opening theory-practice spaces in which differential matterings actually matter, then we need post-qualitative to be a dwelling which is capacious, airy, heart-ful, and has no doors. I say ‘no doors’ because, as Derrida (2002, p. 14) notes, ‘if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality ... as soon as there are a door and windows, it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality.’ Derrida goes on to draw a distinction between ‘the hospitality of invitation’ and ‘the hospitality of visitation’. In visitation, he says, ‘there is no door. Anyone can come at any time and can come in without needing a key for the door. There are no customs checks with a visitation. But there are customs and police checks with an invitation’ (Derrida, 2002, p. 14).

What would it mean – what would it do – to pursue thinking-with the possibility of post-qualitative work as visitation? The visitor may be the uninvited, the stranger, the one who, or that which, brings what is difficult, unforeseen, unknown and unanticipateable – a something to reckon with. To paraphrase Derrida, if I was only prepared to welcome those invited ones, the ones I am ready and prepared for, who come at the allotted hour, and who look like others I already know, where then is hospitality? Conceptualising post-qualitative work as visitation,

then, means working beyond the protocols of invitation to destabilise the centrality of the ‘white episteme’ of eurocentric scholarship and its colonial ways of knowing and being. I wager that if the meaning of post-qualitative is bound up with the geopolitical materialization of racialized modes of knowledge production, then its chances for visitation are limited, and the possibilities for loosening the energy voids and in-betweens that Koro-Ljungberg (2016) speaks of will be corralled back into a dead end.

And if this talk of visitation sounds like it is oriented too much towards the human, then let’s step aside from that presumption. In a string-figuring workshop a sandwich hoisted on a string from the ceiling spun a swirling whorl as visitation, rearranging space-time-mattering, disarranging necks, eyes, bodies to effect collaborative doings differently (Taylor and Tobias-Green, 2018). A toilet roll visitation unrolled a collaboration on the political, economic, social, cultural and moral functions of bodies, their properties, products and their so-called ‘waste’, indicating how toilet paper matters in the materialization of fear, loathing and acceptability (Taylor and White, 2018). And a certain slant of light¹ in a particular city on a singular day ignited a musing pause, a visitational heft, inviting me to attend again to this weathered place with the university where I worked. Such light as visitation was exacting, capricious, exceptional, picking out detail on metal, making cobblestones shine and buildings sharpen, momentarily reassembling that city’s ‘seeing-feeling-sensing history’ and its multiple ‘convergences and collisions of pasts-presents’ (Taylor and Ulmer, 2020).

So, I think, this is where the possibilities of post-qualitative work lie: in attending to – in being response-able to and for – the filigree twists and turns provoked by visitation. Thinking visitation as erratic and errant encounter entails a relational ethico-politics of accountability, to hold oneself open to scrutiny without the comforts of evasion. My hope is that post-qualitative visitation rights are cultivated and proliferate. No doubt this will require that we be ‘more impatient with each other’ (Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 10) so that the stranger strangenesses of productively unsettling methodological research encounters, relations and conversations find a way to (continue to) animate post-qualitative work.

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¹ I borrow the phrase 'a certain slant of light' from the title of a poem by Emily Dickinson. The full text of the poem can be found here
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45723/theres-a-certain-slant-of-light-320>